



BERMUDA – October 2021

CONTENTS

WOMAN HITS OUT AT LAND VALUATION DEPARTMENT	1
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Woman hits out at land valuation department

The Government has been accused of sending “offensive” letters to property owners that demanded entry to their houses to check if they were dodging extra tax payments for home improvements.

One woman who received a land valuation department letter said she felt as if she had been accused of a crime.

The woman, who asked not to be named, said she was threatened by the letter and was also scared to allow strangers into her home because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

She added: “The first sentence of this letter outright accuses me, and others I know of, of having made alterations without permission and cheating government of revenue.

“This is not only extremely offensive, but in the case of this property, is 100 per cent incorrect.

“To start from a premise of guilt therefore, is a complete waste of the inspector’s time in cases like mine, and an unnecessary waste of government’s money.”

The woman, from Pembroke, added that her property details were already stored by the Government and questioned why they did not check their records first.

She asked: “How accurate are land valuation records and are they starting from the premise that everyone has something to hide?

“Is every household and commercial premises being selected, or is selection random? Is this a prelude to increasing land tax across the board?

The woman said: “They have the power to enter any premises they like.

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“How will this work given that people are being very careful about who they let in due to Covid? Are they overriding this personal protection choice?”

“I know I won’t let them in, mask or no mask. Yet the paperwork suggests if I refuse they will call the police.”

The letter warned that an inspection of the house would have to be carried because alterations had been made to the property which could affect its annual rental value and land tax fees.

But the woman said that no major alterations had been made to the building since it was constructed about 80 years ago.

The letter, signed by Diane Elliott, the director of the land valuation department, said: “In light of these changes, it is necessary for a member of staff to visit the property to conduct a survey to establish if there should be an amendment to the valuation list.”

The letter added that the inspection would be carried out by an official from the land valuation department – and that the owner would commit an offence if entry was refused.

The letter added that punishment “on summary conviction” was “a fine of \$500”.

It warned: “It shall be the duty of every police officer, at the request of the director, to render such assistance as may be necessary to enable any person duly authorised to exercise his powers under this section.”

A spokesman for the ministry of home affairs defended the letter and the policy of home inspections.

He said: “Without specific details of the individual or property in question, it is impossible to explain why the inspection letter was sent.

“However, the ministry can advise that the owner or occupier is given not less than 24 hours notice in writing before inspecting any property.

“Also, along with the inspection letter is a brochure explaining the process from start to finish.”

He added that contact details for the inspector tasked with the job were also listed in case people had any questions.

The spokesman said: “As per the law, the ministry can advise that the procedure of mailing the letter and brochure informing the occupier has been in place for years.”

He added that if the woman had contacted the official the department was “confident ... they would have been satisfied with the outcome”.

The spokesman said that the Government was “fully aware” of the Covid-19 risk and health ministry precautions would be enforced for its inspectors.

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He added the letter said that access to the inside of commercial properties was required, but was not “always the case with residential ones”.

The spokesman said the woman should contact the official named in the letter “so that we may directly address their concerns and receive feedback on how we can improve the process”.

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